

What Does Google Mean by “Evil”?

Pretty much ever since Paul Buchheit suggested “Don’t be evil” as a corporate values statement (and Amit Patel begun writing it on whiteboards around the office), any time Google does something people don’t like, they begin calling it “evil” and complaining that Google is violating its prime directive.

But surely “evil” means something more than just “wrong” or “bad”. If the girl across the street peers through your window to watch you undress, we might say that was bad and wrong and awful, but I don’t think anyone would try to claim it was evil. Evil is a really strong term!

Now part of the joke is that Google seems to be using it rather loosely. If you look at [their examples](#) of evil deeds, they seem rather mundane compared to cackling supervillains and mass murderers. They specifically name three: showing irrelevant ads, using pop-ups or other annoying gimmicks, and selling off actual search results.

Hardly the stuff of comic books. But what do these three have in common? **They’re all instances of refusing to make things worse for your users in order to make more money.** Perhaps that still seems like a mundane conception of evil, but I think it gets at something important. Evil isn’t just about doing terrible things — it’s about doing terrible things for bad reasons. The evil villain cackles and brags about how they’re on the side of evil — they explicitly oppose doing good. And this definition of evil is all about that: if you’re working against your own users, you must have crossed the line and joined the other side.

When you stop to think about it, it’s wild how many companies have done just that: Printer manufacturers who put chips on their ink cartridges, so you can’t refill or recycle them but instead have to buy a new full-price cartridge. Apple preventing the Kindle app from having any sort of ebook buying functionality. Web publishers who break articles up into 20 pages so that you have to load 20 different ads just to read one article. These are pretty banal evils, but it’s striking that I can’t think of any example where Google has done anything like that. (Perhaps someone will name one I’ve missed in the comments.)

There are lots of things I disagree with Google about — the most recent being their refusal to [let my friends with chosen names](#) use Google+ — but those things aren’t evil by this definition. For example, Google [defends](#) their real names policy by saying it’ll lead to better conversations. They still claim to be fighting for the user.

So if you want to argue with Google, that’s the way to do it: don’t say that they’re hurting someone out there in the world or violating some rule or principle, say that what they’re doing isn’t serving their users. Because that’s the line Google’s afraid to cross.

Thanks to Kragen Sitaker for [discussions](#) that inspired this post.

UPDATE: [Chris Soghoian observes](#) Google refuses to add Do-Not-Track support to its browsers or servers in order to maximize ad profits. [Scott Teresi suggests](#) Google’s refusal to provide customer support (in order to save money) qualifies. [Tom Slee reminds me](#) of their infamous net neutrality deal with Verizon. [John Gruber argues](#) that having ads at all is evil in this sense. [Mark Heath points to](#) those infuriating YouTube ads.

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